

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE **21st MARCH 2021- PASSION SUNDAY**

INTRODUCTION



"I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:23)

This week we enter ***Passiontide***, the two weeks leading up to Easter Sunday. After the relative levity of *Refreshment Sunday* (aka *Mothering Sunday*) last week, these words of Jesus about seeds and death can come as something of a jolt. In the week when the nation marks the anniversary of the first Covid Lockdown, you might be feeling, "Haven't we had enough of death and gloom?!"

But stop for a minute. Picture a seed. Hard and dry, withered and for all appearances lifeless. And that's how it will stay ... unless it is planted. Only then will the vitality hidden inside it burst forth into life and colour.

Jesus' words are an encouragement to you and me to be able to tell the difference between what is good and joy-giving in our lives, and what may have had its time but of which we now need to let go. People who cling to these things, mistaking them for life itself, will be left (in the words of the writer Penelope Wilcock) "with a handful of hard, wizened, shrivelled, dusty little hopes, dead dreams." Jesus' invitation is to allow those dusty hopes and dead dreams to give way to new, abundant life. Which is not to belittle the pain, but to affirm that it is not the end of the story.

"Follow me!", Jesus says.

CALL TO WORSHIP

In this season of Lent,
a time of preparation,
**God calls us to gather to worship,
to pray, to sing, to listen for God's voice.**

As we walk with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem,
**we see looming before us a cross,
a shadow on the horizon.**

We gather as fellow travellers to the city,
to the cross, and to what lies beyond.
**God has called us together, and so we worship,
we pray, we sing, we listen.**

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

Lord Jesus Christ,
we confess we have failed you as did your first disciples.
We ask for your mercy and your help.

Our selfishness betrays you:
Lord, forgive us.
Christ have mercy.

We fail to share the pain of your suffering:
Lord, forgive us.
Christ have mercy.

We run away from those who abuse you:
Lord, forgive us.
Christ have mercy.

We are afraid of being known to belong to you:
Lord, forgive us.
Christ have mercy.

May the Father of all mercies
cleanse *us* from *our* sins,
and restore *us* in his image
to the praise and glory of his name,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

ACCLAMATION OF TRUST

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul;

O my God, in you I trust.

You are the God of my salvation;

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

In you I hope all the day long.

O my God, in you I trust.

Remember, Lord, your compassion and love,
for they are from everlasting.

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul;

O my God, in you I trust.

OLD TESTAMENT READING

ISAIAH 50.4-9 (New Living Translation)

The Sovereign Lord has given me his words of wisdom,
so that I know how to comfort the weary.

Morning by morning he wakens me
and opens my understanding to his will.

The Sovereign Lord has spoken to me,
and I have listened.

I have not rebelled or turned away.

I offered my back to those who beat me
and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard.

I did not hide my face
from mockery and spitting.

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore, I have set my face like a stone,
determined to do his will.

And I know that I will not be put to shame.

He who gives me justice is near.

Who will dare to bring charges against me now?

Where are my accusers?

Let them appear!

See, the Sovereign Lord is on my side!

Who will declare me guilty?



All my enemies will be destroyed
like old clothes that have been eaten by moths!

Thanks be to God.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION – UNLESS A SEED DIES

If you would follow me,
follow where life will lead:
Do not look for me among the dead,
For I am hidden in pain, risen in love;
There is no harvest without sowing of grain.

*All that is hidden will be made clear.
All that is dark now will be revealed.
What you have heard in the dark
proclaim in the light;
What you hear in whispers
proclaim from the housetops.*

If you would rise with me,
rise through your destiny:
do not refuse the death which brings you life,
for as the grain in the earth
must die for rebirth,
So I have planted your life deep within mine.

*All that is hidden will be made clear.
All that is dark now will be revealed.
What you have heard in the dark
proclaim in the light;
What you hear in whispers
proclaim from the housetops.*

THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

Narrator: The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Peter recalls what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Peter: They took Jesus when we were at a place called Gethsemane.
(Pause.)

I had never seen him so troubled, so full of grief....

He went a small distance away from us and fell face down on the ground, as if he were begging God to release him from his terrible sorrow.

We were supposed to be keeping watch with him; he wanted us to stay with him while he prayed.

I wish to heaven now that I had been a little stronger.... But although my heart was heavy, so were my eyelids. I couldn't stay awake. *(Pause.)*

Three times he woke us – three times he asked us to stay awake and watch with him, each time his face showing deeper sorrow. Each time I told myself that I would be stronger, that he needed us to stay awake, that I loved him too much to let him bear his troubles alone. *(Pause.)* The spirit is willing but the body is weak. *(Pause.)*

Then, after he woke us up the third time, the garden filled with people.

Narrator: Judas describes his betrayal.

Judas: I had arranged a signal with the chief priests – that the man I greeted with a kiss would be the man they had come to arrest. So as soon as I saw Jesus, I went up to him and kissed him. And...he let me. He knew I had betrayed him, but he still looked at me with love in his eyes – forgiving me even as I broke his heart. *(Pause.)* They stepped forward and seized him.

Peter reacted without thinking as usual and struck out with his sword, cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest – I thought that all hell was about to break loose, then Jesus stepped forward and told Peter to put his sword away. He touched the servant where he was bleeding and his ear was healed.

And then he gave himself up to them. *(Pause.)*

So much for our saviour, our Messiah, our leader – this man we had hoped would free us was led away like a sheep. *(Pause.)*

When the other disciples saw that they had lost, they ran for their lives. His friends, his followers, the people who had once been prepared to do anything for him – all of them ran away. *(Pause.)*

And I ran with them.

Narrator: Pontius Pilate reflects on his condemnation of Jesus.

Pilate: He was an innocent man. He knew that I knew it, and that he only had to answer my questions to save his own life. He must have realised the danger he was in – he had already been beaten around a bit at the Sanhedrin by the look of things, and he knew why they would have needed to bring him to me.

I couldn't help but admire his nerve, though. He stood there calmly, listening to the charges they had brought against him – he wouldn't deny them, he just stood and listened. *(Pause.)* But I thought that I could still help him. I hadn't yet released a prisoner to them, as is my custom at Passover, and I thought I could release him – release to the Jews their King. To make it easier I made sure they couldn't possibly make any other choice – I offered them the life of Jesus, or that of a murderer, a notorious criminal who the public had been glad to see caught and locked up ready for execution. Jesus or Barabbas.

But they chose Jesus.....

Narrator: Peter denies Jesus

Peter: I was sitting in the courtyard outside the Sanhedrin, my whole world collapsing around me, terrified for my life but too full of grief to know what to do next, when a servant girl recognised me as one of Jesus' friends. I quickly denied it – the crowds wanted blood and I wasn't going to let them have mine – and I left as quickly as possible.

But on my way put another girl saw mw and started telling people there that I was with Jesus. I swore at her, saying I didn't know the man. *(Pause.)* Later, still more people came up to me – they had heard my accent, they said it gave me away.

I was only thinking of my own life, I didn't want to be taken away too.....

So I called down curses on myself and swore to them that I didn't know Jesus. (*Longer Pause.*) At that moment a cock crowed and I remembered Jesus' words to me earlier – 'before the cock crows, you will disown me three times'. (*Pause.*)

He was right. When it came to it I couldn't stand up for him any more than I could stay awake for him. I betrayed my friend and I left him to die alone.

Narrator: Pilate doubts himself and attempts to justify his actions.

Pilate: I could have saved him. As I listened to the crowds calling for him to be crucified – even then I could have stepped in. I could have stopped it. (*Pause.*)

But I have my responsibilities to think about, my position. I am supposed to control the people I govern, and sometimes to do that they must be given what they want.

If I had made any other decision it could have sparked a rebellion.

I made it clear that I disapproved of their judgement, that I knew him to be an innocent man – I washed my hands in front of them all.

Narrator: A Roman Soldier who was duty that day, gives his account.

Soldier: There was something different about him. Even his crime – 'King of the Jews', what kind of crime is that? (*Pause.*)

Didn't stop us from mocking him though. We put a scarlet robe on him, put a staff in his hands, and we hailed him like he really was a king. It seemed kind of funny at the time.

Some of the others made a crown of thorns and put it on his head – I thought that was going a bit far, but it's easy to get carried away. We see so many executions, so much violence, what's a bit more blood? There was something about the way he stood there, clearly in pain, clearly distressed – as the blood ran into his eyes and he was hit over the head with that big staff – there was something about the way he just accepted

it. It wasn't resignation, but he wasn't angry or malicious either, he just.....accepted it. *(Pause.)*

Yeah, there was something different about him.

Narrator: A passer-by who was coming in from the country, Simon of Cyrene, gives his account.

Simon: He was obviously in a bad way. He'd been horribly beaten up, and flogged – and he had these thorns on his head in a sort of mock crown. They'd done everything they could to humiliate him, make an example of him. *(Pause.)*

I suppose they succeeded, in a way. I couldn't see anyone else wanting that to happen to them. *(Pause.)*

I was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.....He was having trouble walking and when he collapsed it was me the guards spotted in the crowd. So they made me help him.

When I felt how heavy the cross was, I was surprised he'd got it that far by himself, the state he was in. So I took one end of it and walked the rest of the way to Golgotha.

Then they crucified him, hammering nails into his hands.

We've all seen it before, but somehow this was worse than usual – there was something about the pain in the man's face, as though it wasn't only caused by what was being done to his body. It was as if he had the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. So much suffering on one face.

Narrator: A chief priest details the charge against Jesus

Chief Priest: I went to see his justly deserved punishment with the other chief priests and teachers of the law.

The charge above his head said, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews' – we asked for it to be removed, insulting as it was to our people and our religion, but they refused and there it stayed, a reminder of the blasphemy he committed.

This man who had claimed he could destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, who said that he was the Son of God –

there he hung, reduced to one of many criminals dying in public.....disgraced.....pathetic.

(Sarcastically.) He saved others but he couldn't save himself!

All he had to do was come down from the cross and we would all have believed in him. He said he was the Son of God – but God didn't seem to want to rescue him.

Narrator: Simon tells what happened next.....

Simon: Then, at the sixth hour, an unnatural darkness came over the land and at the ninth hour, Jesus called out – 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?'

(Quietly.) 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Was he calling Elijah? But Elijah didn't save him, and with one final, terrible cry, he died.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.

Narrator: It was only then that they realised. *(Pause.)* This man, the man they had denied, mocked, and crucified – surely was the Son of God.

This is the Passion of the Lord.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Let us affirm our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

**Though he was divine
he did not cling to equality with God,
but made himself nothing.**

**Taking the form of a slave,
he was born in human likeness.
He humbled himself
and was obedient to death,
even the death of the cross.**

**Therefore God has raised him on high,
and given him the name above every name:
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.**

PRAYERS

Let us pray to the God who loves us
And understands our needs.

To the bidding: Let your name be glorified
Please respond: let your will be done.

Let your name be glorified:
let your will be done.

God of mercy, we pray for all church leaders,
and all who are being called
into particular ministries, both lay and ordained.
We pray especially for any who are wrestling
with the demands of such a calling,
that they may be given courage
to offer themselves in your service.
Silence.

Let your name be glorified:
let your will be done.

All-seeing God, watch over the nations
of the world
in all their plans and actions,
conflicts and disasters;
guard the children, guide the leaders
and give us all your peace.
Silence.

Let your name be glorified:
let your will be done.

God of love, be present in every heart and home,
to cherish, to challenge,
to reassure and to comfort us.
Silence.

Let your name be glorified:
let your will be done.

God of wholeness, we bring to your love
those who are weighed down with suffering,
or imprisoned by their fears.
Ease their burdens and give them strength
to bear what cannot be avoided.
We pray especially for Adrina and Alan Price, David New, Anna Clements, and
Aaron. And in a moment of silence, we hold before you those known only to
us and to you.
Silence.

Let your name be glorified:
let your will be done.

God of life, we bring to you those
whose earthly lives have ended,
that in your mercy they may have everlasting peace.
We remember those who have recently died especially Stephen Lindner.
And we remember with love and gratitude: Angela Smith, Dennis Shaw,
Doreen Wren, John Crutchley, Stewart Nichols, Dennis Roxburgh and
Bill Watson.
As the first anniversary of lockdown approaches we remember before you all
who have lost their lives during this pandemic and all who mourn their loss.
Silence.

Let your name be glorified:
let your will be done.

Gracious God, you are always
so much more ready to give than we are to receive;

open our hearts and minds
to live the costly way of love.

Merciful Father,
**Accept these prayers,
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin
against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass
against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory, for ever
and ever.
Amen.**

Pause for Reflection

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.



See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

SENDING

O Christ, the Master Carpenter
who, at the last, through wood and nails,
purchased our whole salvation.
Wield well your tools
in the workshop of your world,
so that we,
who come rough-hewn to your bench,
may here be fashioned
to a truer beauty of your hand.
We ask it for your own name's sake.



Lord, set your blessing on us
as we begin this day together.
Confirm in us the truth
by which we rightly live;
confront us with the truth
from which we wrongly turn.

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

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